

# Youth culture and Islam in Indonesia

PAM NILAN AND MICHELLE MANSFIELD

## ABSTRACT

Indonesian youth culture is sometimes depicted through a moral panic discourse about mixed sex socializing. In this article, the authors challenge that view by presenting some ethnographic material on young Muslim Indonesians of both sexes socialising in an internet café and gathering during Ramadhan in a mall in Solo, Central Java. Young Indonesians enact everyday youth culture through the negotiation of space, time, and technology within the strong discourse of moral propriety and gender separation advised by contemporary Islam. The intense social bonding between same sex age peers provides security and reassurance for young men and women in the transition to adulthood. Technology is now integral to this bonding.

## KEY WORDS

Youth culture, internet café, mall, technology.

## INTRODUCTION

This article addresses a common practice in contemporary Indonesian youth culture: young Muslim Indonesians of both sexes socializing in the internet café and the shopping mall. The internet café and the shopping mall are public/private spaces which differ markedly from their predecessors: the *warung* (small shop) and the traditional open-air market. Shopping malls are ostentatious consumerist spaces offering a multitude of novel opportunities to young Indonesians (Atmodiwirjo 2008; Ansori 2009; Pratiwo 2003; Rustan 2010; Van Leeuwen 2011).<sup>1</sup> Internet cafés in 2007 offered Indonesian youth online access to the world (Utomo et al. 2012). Ramadhan encourages social

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<sup>1</sup> Van Leeuwen's book *Lost in mall* offers an extensive discussion on the characteristics of new Indonesian shopping malls and how people use them.

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gatherings and stronger pious expressions for Muslim Indonesians of all ages. The holy month custom is *ngabuburit* – socialising with friends and family (often in public places) around dusk while waiting for the daily fast to end (Wijana 2011). From observation, it has become much more common now for young people in Solo to conduct *ngabuburit* in shopping malls, which are air-conditioned and sell sweet drinks and snacks with which to break the fast. This adds to amount of time they already spend socializing with same sex peers in the mall.

Around 50 years ago, an Islamic resurgence started to become influential in Indonesia (Brenner 1996; Howell 2001) and began to influence the cultural preferences of young people. More recently, further new directions for the expression of youth culture emerged in post-New Order Indonesia (Budiman et al. 2012) with greater freedom of the press and the rapid growth of the middle class. An important aspect of moral regulation in revitalized Islam is insistence on the separation of the sexes. Islam provides a wealth of judgments and pronouncements on the dangers of mixed-sex socializing, for girls in particular. The phenomenon of young unmarried and unrelated women and men socializing is a source of pervasive moral panic (Parker 2009; Smith-Hefner 2009; Nilan 2008). The great fear is that unregulated male-female contact might encourage “free” (pre-marital) sex which is a sin - *zina*. The constant adjustments of mainstream political parties in Indonesia to accommodate pressure from Muslim groups urging evermore moral regulation of women, and greater prohibition of contact between unrelated people of different sexes (Tanuwidjaja 2010), indicates the popular strength of these two regulatory discourses. Rules for socializing are quite different for Muslim male and female youth in Indonesia, with boys permitted far greater freedom (Smith-Hefner 2005).

At the same time though, cultures are never static. Since the late eighties, there has been a considerable growth of modern Muslim “cool” in Indonesia. Barendregt (2008: 161) maintains that this new emphasis on trendy Muslim modernity “relates Islam to a modern world of lifestyle, talk shows and fashion”. For example, Indonesian Muslim youth culture is consolidated by modest Muslim fashions, *nasyid* boy bands, Koran wallpaper and ring-tones for cell phones, *zam-zam* cola, and so on.

The article uses ethnographic data collected in 2007 from high school students in Solo, Central Java. We acknowledge that youth socializing now means negotiation of space and time within the strong discourse of moral propriety and gender separation advised by contemporary Islam. The internet café and the shopping mall offer important public communication and identity display resources for youth through their material components and their urban architecture. They allow the possibility of morally legitimate youth socializing. Time orders the moral regime of these two kinds of places, since the period of respectable youth socializing ends as night begins.

## SOLO

The first impression of daytime Solo<sup>2</sup> for a foreign researcher is the seemingly inevitable traffic chaos and street bustle of a large Indonesian city. Central Java is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The second largest municipality in Central Java, Surakarta had an official 2010 census population of 499,337 (BPS Surakarta 2011), but that figure refers only to the formally designated city. If the neighbouring towns of Boyolali, Klaten, Sukoharjo, Wonogiri, Karanganyar, and Sragen that make up Greater Surakarta are included, the figure is 5,984,519 (BPS Surakarta 2011). Yet the pace of life in Solo is still quite leisurely and traditional compared to other cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, and nearby Yogyakarta (Parker and Nilan 2013).

The second impression is the abundance of young people thronging the inner city and satellite suburbs at peak times. From flocks of tiny pre-school girls peeping out from the all-enveloping school uniform of a *madrasah*, to trios of technical high school boys trading blows in the train station forecourt, to the masses of young people moving about daily on their motorbikes: young women wearing an elegant headscarf and high heels, young men in a well-cut shirt and tie; both sexes texting relentlessly on their phones while stopped at the traffic lights. At night, though there are very few young people about. Contrasts of poverty and affluence are striking. For every well-heeled university student taking leisurely breakfast at a noodle stall there is a young inhabitant of the riverside shanty towns who has been hauling rocks on a building site since five a.m. Ragged young beggars either tap politely on the windows of cars and taxis, or stand in groups playing cheap instruments and waiting for spare change. Boys with fashionable haircuts and tight jeans scuttle fearfully down alleyways away from the military-clad *Laskar Jundullah* boys on a training run through the city, hinting at the strident vigilantism of local jihad groups. Generally, though the mood of contemporary youth in Solo is upbeat and optimistic as they move through the micro-social worlds of this rapidly developing city. Young Solonese are observably oriented to global youth culture (both Muslim and secular) in regard to technology and fashion, even while their city remains a bastion of Javanese language and cultural forms. For perhaps the majority, religious identification is central to their sense of self, but very few are extremists.

## WHAT IS YOUTH?

To write about youth culture in Indonesia is to assume there is such a thing as youth. Yet youth is a fairly recent social construct. Most of human history has recognized only adults and children. While puberty certainly is the short developmental stage between child and adult, the lengthy period of “youth” is a modern, socially constructed category. In Europe, adolescence was invented during the Industrial Revolution, at the same time as the steam engine (Musgrove 1964: 33). Similarly, in rapidly industrializing Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Solo is also known as Surakarta.

today, the formal category of youth covers a long life period. As Naafs and White (2012: 5) point out, the new law on youth (*UU no. 40/2009, article 1.1*) defines youth as aged “between 16 and 30 years”.

We can identify a number of contributing factors to the duration and distinctiveness of contemporary youth. First, people are living longer (Nilan, Julian, and Germov 2007: 10); second, the upward credentialing<sup>3</sup> of the labour force through education (DiPrete and Grusky 1990); and third, the recognition of youth as a demographic category in legislation and policy (Lamb and Mason 2008). The final factor is the expanded range of consumer choices and leisure options for young people in the global economy (Nilan, Julian, and Germov 2007: 230). In short, youth culture in most countries now shows distinct patterns of leisure, consumption, social bonding, and courting. In Indonesia, late free-choice marriage (Jones 2005), much more education (Naafs and White 2012: 5), and the rapid growth of consumerism in the urban middle class (Ansori 2009; Gerke 2000) have seen similar youth trends emerge.

Understandings of Indonesian youth have changed greatly since the early years of the twentieth century when young people were struggling to free their country from colonial rule (Juliastuti 2006). That heroic generation<sup>4</sup> of young people was known as *pemuda* and the term is still in formal use. However, the daily media and ordinary Indonesians now talk much more about *remaja* (teenagers), *anak muda* (young people) or ABG (*Anak Baru Gede*, preadolescents) than about *pemuda*. Youth are often criticized in the Indonesian media and in political rhetoric. They are portrayed as obsessed with consumption and hedonism. They are seen as a generation in moral danger. The emphasis is on risk: risk of free sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, reckless behaviour, and fighting. They stand accused of lacking religion, lacking respect for parents, and showing contempt for traditional culture. They are implicitly blamed for a wide range of social ills (Parker and Nilan 2013).

At the same time, the media plays a dual manipulative role. Young people are the primary target of the consumer industries that sponsor the media through advertising. Yet the media also fosters the moral panic about what young people do with the massive array of consumer and lifestyle choices presented to them. The rhetoric of politicians and journalists makes contemporary Indonesian youth sound like a lost generation, yet they are anything but lost. They are gearing up to run the country. The majority of Indonesian youth remains concerned with education, with future careers, and with balancing fun and propriety in their lives (Parker and Nilan 2013). This latter balance is amply demonstrated by the examples below of youth interaction in the internet café and the shopping mall.

<sup>3</sup> The upward credentialing of the labour market means that higher and higher educational credentials are needed to find work that provides a steady income.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Mannheim (1952) saw each generation as distinctive due to different historical, cultural, and social factors that prevailed at the time.

## METHODOLOGY

In 2007, the first author conducted four months of research in Solo. This was part of an Australian government-funded four-year research project titled *Ambivalent adolescents in Indonesia*. This article uses data from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the public gathering places favoured by young people in Solo. Two spaces seemed particularly popular with high school students: the internet café and the shopping mall. Data in *Bahasa Indonesia* was translated by the first author with assistance from Indonesian colleagues.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

### *Youth and individualization*

One major effect of globalization on countries in Southeast Asia has been increased emphasis on the individual: a focus on individual lives and individual choices. It is claimed that individual success or failure now eclipses collective endeavour. Yet the process of individualization in Indonesia is not the same as elsewhere. There is not, and has never been, such an intense focus on the individual per se as in the West. We must be careful not to assume, for example, that highly individualized choices (Brannen and Nilsen 2007) are now the norm for all young Indonesians. Moreover, increased individual autonomy and freedom do not necessarily imply the wholesale repudiation of tradition, nor the withering of religious belief, nor the waning of trust in marriage and extended family support (see Nilan 2008).

The decisions of individual young Indonesians usually reflect not just their personal aspirations but family and kin negotiations that incorporate local cultural influences and encode some traditional discourses (Setyawati 2008). Collective values remain salient in the cultures of the Indonesian archipelago. Extended family ties offer kin support mechanisms that bolster the resilience of youth in dealing with an insecure labour market. Yet at the same time, in Indonesia as elsewhere in contemporary Asia, the ideal of the middle-class urban individual is moving steadily towards the paradigm of the rational choosing subject (Giddens 1991): an entrepreneurial, reflexive self (Beck 2000), capable of independent action and autonomous behaviour. Within the field of youth culture, David Muggleton (2000) finds youth subcultures are significant because they offer young people a place to construct an alternative identity in the face of largely adult-defined, limited versions of identity offered to them by school and family. This holds true for Indonesia. Although there are only a few distinctive subcultures, youth culture per se offers the experience of intense peer engagement within which to construct an independent sense of self and identity.

### *Youth culture*

Youth culture includes a number of practices: constructing an identity, socializing, consumption, claims to legitimacy, and adult power, creativity and cultural mixing. Young Indonesians bring considerable creative energy



and enthusiasm to the business of working their way through an increasingly competitive education system, in a daily world saturated with the globally distributed message to consume.

In the realm of moral conduct, young women in particular are expected to conform to norms of conventional behaviour. They rarely go anywhere alone. It is considered far worse for girls to engage in “free” social mixing that might lead to pre-marital sex. Islam provides a wealth of judgments and pronouncements on the dangers of mixed-sex socializing for girls (Parker 2009; Smith-Hefner 2009). At the same time, however, there is often a strong local tradition of broad informal socializing in many cultures of the archipelago. In Java, for example, small children are encouraged to be sociable, spending lots of time playing with other children of both sexes. Later, this positive discourse of open social mixing still seems to subtly operate when youth socialize informally with peers during their teens and twenties, despite the strength of the new moral prohibition on girls and their conduct.

Many kinds of spaces are significant in the lives of young urban Indonesians. Not only are physical places important, but also the virtual spaces accessible through mobile phone and internet technology. These new technologies enable communication, information sharing and networking. In both public and virtual spaces, young people can collectively connect with the cultures and political agendas of a world brought closer by the pressures of globalization (Nayak 2004), even while they give priority to the local; to their friends, siblings, and cousins.

### *The internet café and the shopping mall*

Communication and information technology has had a huge effect on Indonesian youth culture. As an aspect of globalization, the time-space compression (Harvey 1990) achieved by new forms of media and information technology erodes constraints of distance and time on social organization and interaction, and accelerates interconnectedness. This is strongly observable not only in mobile phone communication, which facilitates Indonesian youth socializing through the ubiquitous practice of texting (Goggin 2006), but also in internet communication through emails and social networking sites. Relevant to Indonesia, Lim (2004: 274) maintains that the “convivial medium” of the internet is now central to everyday informal communication. Bart Barendregt (2008: 160) argues that cellular phone technology enables young Indonesians to be “modern, mobile, and Muslim”.

Young Indonesians use technology to establish identity in both the real world and the virtual world, if the two can indeed be separated. This mediated engagement with new information and communication technologies involves young Indonesians in a creative enterprise that is also a form of control over their changing lives in the journey towards adulthood. They are able to connect instantly with local, regional, and global media resources for reflection and self-imagining, despite ambivalences in framings of the female self relative to technology. In Muslim-majority Indonesia, the regulatory practices of Islam

emphasise the strict moral behaviour of teenage girls and young women, producing anxieties at the intersection of religion with individualized modernity, even in regard to using the phone.

Access to cellular phone technology and the internet is now common. Iwu Utomo et al. (2012: 1-2) found that of a sample of 3,006 young people aged between 20 and 34 in the Greater Jakarta area in 2010, 85 per cent owned a handphone (*hp* 'mobile phone'), although only 60 per cent of those with primary school education or less owned a *hp*, compared to over 97 per cent of those with post-school qualifications. However, this does not mean that poorer youth never use a *hp* since they often carry a cheap sim card to insert in someone else's phone. In the same survey, 40 per cent said they accessed the internet. Among internet users, the most common uses were social networking and email. This concurs with earlier findings in Yogyakarta by Bjørn Furuholt and Stein Kristiansen (2007).

In rapidly developing countries, it has been argued that shopping malls are citadels of celebration for the new consumerism (Abaza 2001). For the past 30 years, Indonesian people have been flocking to urban shopping malls to stroll, to browse, to see and be seen, to socialise, and be noticed (Van Leeuwen 2011). Since the start of the new millennium, shopping malls in Indonesia have incorporated more and more facilities, diversions, displays, services, and forms of entertainment to attract the attention of evermore discerning and selective mall patrons, as the consuming middle class expands. Indonesian malls are purposefully "designed for the display and consumption of modern commodities", including the successful self (Ansori 2009: 92). They therefore suit the need of contemporary urban Indonesian young people to "showcase" their identities (Juliastuti 2006: 142).

For young people engaging socially in both the internet café and the mall, the moral direction of action is constituted through choice in temporalized space. For example, there is not just one single moral reading of a young Indonesian woman in a shopping mall. The moral nature of her action is constituted so much in what she does and where (or what she wears), and also when and with whom she does it – and the same goes for young men to some extent. The components of space, time, and discourse shape how youth moral panics are circumvented by young Indonesians who literally just want to have fun. The binding of a specific space with a specific time achieves public moral legitimacy within the discourse of Islamic piety. Mobile phone technology provides the final piece in the puzzle, the complex strategy of balancing fun and propriety. Here the territorial distinctiveness of Indonesian Islam is never lost, but rather incorporated.

#### INTERNET CAFÉ OBSERVATIONS, NOVEMBER 2007

Although in 2007 every young person encountered in Solo had a mobile phone, she/he rarely seemed to have personal internet access, or even the use of a home computer. Internet cafés offered access to teenagers and young people for email communication, music downloads, blogs, celebrity gossip,

news, sports updates, games, social networking, and so on. They were places to socialize and be collectively entertained. There was rarely a single young user at a terminal. Not only was it cheaper for two, three, or even four young people to share access, but the activity itself was viewed as something to do with friends. For an hour or so in the afternoon, still wearing school uniforms, they would chat, laugh, call out to other users, and send phone text messages back and forth as they browsed, played games, and downloaded music in small groups.

Later in the evening, the cheerful teenagers were replaced by adult males. By then, the space of the internet café had taken on the flavour of a very different moral economy even though it was the same physical place. The following observations were made in an air-conditioned internet café in *Jalan Slamet Riyadi* – the main street in Solo – during November 2007.

3 p.m.: High school students aged 13-16 from nearby Muslim, Christian, and public schools arrive quickly in single-sex groups of three to six, buying snacks and drinks as they crowd in. Latecomers wait outside, chatting for terminals to become free. As the teenagers fill the room, the noise and body heat level instantly increases in the small space packed with terminals in tiny booths. Stools are tussled over as groups of three, four, and even five try to crowd into the same terminal. Although a few groups look for information relevant to schoolwork, most take turns to check emails or social networks. Boys play online war games as friends look on. While waiting, the boys send and receive texts on their mobile phones, showing their friends and talking and laughing. Should an email or posting of interest be found, there is a shout and friends gather in to view and comment, even suggesting possible replies. The sound of music tracks all being played at once raises the noise level even further.

A group of four boys has accessed a celebrity website for the sexy girl band *Dewi Dewi*. Their hit *Dokter cinta* (Love doctor) is the ring tone for one of the boys and he plays it as they examine photos on the site together, whispering and laughing. Along the other wall, schoolgirls wearing headscarves search for music clips of Ustad Jefri Al Buchori – the singing Muslim preacher. Soon Jefri's hit song *Yaa Rasulullah* can be heard. Nearby, a boy joins in with the catchy chorus. It is clear that certain boys and girls are emailing and texting each other, although they do not physically connect. There are covert looks, loud whispers, and syncopated giggling as interaction flows back and forth in physical space, phone texting space, and online space.

5 p.m.: The high school students have gone. Now there are young workers and students from technical college and university. There is much less noise and the booths are not so crowded. Individuals are preparing job applications and curriculum vitae. Unlike the earlier cohort, there are several couples and mixed groups, including four young activists who are organizing a local protest action in support of the Global Day of Action for Climate Change on 12 December. Frida (21) tells me that she and her friends, university students, are arranging a small demonstration in Solo as part of climate change protests taking place across the world. Although two of them have access to the internet at home, they do not want their parents to know what they are planning, so they meet at the internet



café to log onto the global campaign site and devise strategies.

9 p.m.: Users now are predominantly adult males. About half are browsing alone at a terminal. The room is quiet except for the low murmur of voices and muffled video combat sounds. Customers are using hired earphones to listen to music. In a few booths, courting couples are sitting closely and holding hands as they browse. There are groups of two or three young men who smoke surreptitiously and talk non-stop in whispers, often playing extreme combat games. Some sites being accessed at this time of night are pornographic. Online gambling is also taking place. There is very little use of mobile phones compared to earlier in the day.

## DISCUSSION

The notes above indicate how the space of the internet café changes discursively due to the progression of time as a component that alters meaning. Contrasting waves of users move through until it becomes part of the dangerous libidinal nighttime economy, even though physically unchanged. In mid-afternoon, the internet café is a gender-inclusive morally safe space for teenage socializing. By late evening, it has become a male-dominated place for online sex, violence, and gambling. Similarly, Furuholt and Kristiansen (2007) found that younger students in the Yogyakarta internet café were after “entertainment and socializing, such as through chatting, games, etcetera” while older users had quite different purposes. Matching observations were made by Rathore and Alhabshi (2005) in Malaysian cyber-café. Liu (2009: 173) also found similar patterns in internet cafés (*wangba*) in China. The noisy groups of young Chinese were there to “entertain themselves, play games, listen to music, watch movies, chat, and so on”, while older users had different purposes.

The space of the internet café is constituted in both the physical and the virtual world. The young people engage in the compelling play of technological and corporeal communication that such places allow. Trajectories of communication lead out and beyond, to the world of media and leisure production. The cell phone and the internet are not anchored to the everyday space of the internet café. They collapse time because there is no temporal difference between a young man talking to the friend next to him, exchanging text messages with a cousin in Yogyakarta, and emailing a fellow Warcraft enthusiast in Malaysia. When war and conflict games were being played it was common to see boys not in control of the keyboard receiving text messages (sms) from friends outside the internet cafe about tricks and shortcuts. They then relayed these tactics to the player.

Rathore and Alhabshi (2005) were concerned that the internet café allows Malaysian teenagers access to pornography and gambling, although they provided no evidence that this was taking place. There was no such access by teenagers observed in the internet café in Solo. First, neither the time of day, nor the situations were conducive to accessing such sites. Second, more than half the users were girls, and in Indonesia they are not associated with a taste for pornography and gambling (Parker 2009). Third, the young people operated in groups. This was collective situated practice, with at least two friends looking over your shoulder who might tell someone if you did

something wrong. Finally, their primary purpose was to socialize, to have fun and be entertained by music, music clips, and online games, not to break the rules. As for the moral dimension, the groups of friends were single sex, not mixed, so there was no physical contact and they kept to mild and conservative entertainment and networking sites. The piety of girls was maintained in conservative bodily comportment and the deliberate seeking out of online sites and apps related to Muslim youth culture icons.

It is difficult to convey the almost frenetic intensity of phone texting as an integral part of socializing and being entertained in the internet café. This was a most striking phenomenon in the space. For example, teen adepts were able to move the computer mouse with one hand while texting with the other, glancing between the screen and the keypad. According to Barendregt (2006: 20), the “new cellular possibilities” of the mobile phone not only provide Indonesian youth with a sense of “anonymity” and “privacy” but the desirable cache of “cool”. There is no way of assessing the content of texts sent and received in the internet café in Solo, but given the observed reactions it would seem at least some text messages were exchanged flirtatiously between teenage girls and boys in the space. It is possible to read this in terms of the gap between public conduct and private interaction that “mobile phone technology inflects” (Garcia-Montes et al. 2006: 72). In Indonesia, there has always been a significant gap between public conduct and private, interaction, and the phenomenon of flirting was not substantially different before the era of mobile phone technology because there were other vectors of communication through which flirting and courting could take place. Yet mobile phone technology makes it all much easier. By communicating in text messages, the young men and women were not publicly in physical contact. They maintained propriety by staying in separate single sex groups, while in the dimension of technologically-mediated personal communication, they were having lots of fun together.

#### YOUTH CULTURE IN THE MALL

Just as the cultural practices of youth in Indonesia are modulated by advances in communication technology, so they are also shaped by an expanding array of consumption choices (Chua 2003). Nowhere is this more evident than the large shopping mall, now a distinctive commercial space in every Indonesian city. The public phenomenon of mall culture has developed rapidly over the last two decades in Indonesian cities (Ansori 2009). Strolling in the mall with friends is now an extremely common practice for young Indonesians (Pratiwo 2003: 12). Although often condemned for encouraging conspicuous material consumption, Indonesian shopping malls are put to other uses by the people who go there, especially strolling, window-shopping, meeting friends, and avoiding hot weather or traffic jams (Rustan 2010). Malls signify a luxurious, cocooned escape – a temporary privileged experience beyond everyday life. They are like the houses of the rich: cool, exotically tiled, and ostentatious (Van Leeuwen 2011); composed of vast architectural elements, with floors

and arching spaces networked by escalators and hung with chandeliers and sculptures. Retail and food outlets, games arcades, and cinemas offer purchase opportunities to the middle class and the aspirational middle class people who are allowed entrance by security guards (Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000). Malls therefore constitute safe yet attractive gathering places for young people, who may not in fact spend any money. Young people use malls for other purposes: entertainment, window-shopping, meeting friends, watching people.

Malls have only appeared in Solo during the past decade, yet have become the places to see and be seen, bustling at most times, and jam-packed during peak shopping and strolling hours. In 2007, hundreds of young people of both sexes – mid-teens to mid-twenties – would flock to Solo Grand Mall after Friday afternoon prayers. Unlike family groups, they did not undertake much shopping. Their usual practice was to move about in small single-sex groups between the five mezzanine floors over a couple of hours. They sat at tables chatting. They leaned on the railings that line each mezzanine floor, looking down into the deep void to talk while observing what other groups of young people were doing. In short, the main social practice of Solonese youth in the mall was a modern example of what is called *nongkrong* (hanging out informally with friends).

During the fasting month of Ramadan in 2007, there were even more young people than usual in the air-conditioned mall during the afternoon. This was an extension of the traditional custom of *ngabuburit*. Clearly, the mall has become the place to be while waiting to end the fast. Abaza (2001: 110) observed a similar phenomenon in Malaysian and Egyptian shopping malls during Ramadan. The following data excerpts give a sense of the relaxed social interaction between young people that characterized *ngabuburit* in the Solo Grand Mall during Ramadan 2007. The balance between propriety and fun is evident throughout.

### *Ngabuburit*

At 5.30 p.m. Solo Grand Mall is buzzing. A live rock band clad in Muslim clothing is blasting out *nasyid* favourites and a young man dressed as Ali Baba in turban and extravagantly curled shoes greets people at the front entrance. The upstairs food court is full of young people but they are not eating or drinking. State senior secondary school student Hidayat<sup>5</sup> is 16. She is wearing the very common combination of tight jeans, long-sleeved top and brightly coloured headscarf. Hidayat says that *pada bulan puasa* (during the fasting month) she often waits with her friends in the mall to *buka puasa bersama* (break the fast together). Hidayat's seventeen-year old cousin Iqbal from Klaten agrees: waiting with friends makes the fasting period each day seem shorter. Hidayat and her younger brother nod their assent. Later a young man called Nurdin, aged 15, a state junior secondary school student, states that *ngabuburit* is so much fun for him and his friends that he thoroughly enjoys the fasting

<sup>5</sup> This name refers to the family name of this girl.

month. He and his group of friends keep each other in line. Because they are together, no one breaks the fast early.

Raras is a state senior secondary school student wearing a purple headscarf. She states “*yang penting nggak ngurangi pahala puasa*” (the important thing is not to diminish the religious merit of fasting). She says she usually reads the Koran in the mosque for *ngabuburit*, except on Fridays and Saturdays, when she goes to the mall with her friends to wait while listening to the live band. Hearing this, a boy at a nearby table calls out “*ngabuburit paling asyik kumpul bareng teman-teman ngobrol, bahas pelajaran, dan nyanyi sambil main gitar*” (*ngabuburit* is the most fun when you’re together with your friends, talking, discussing school, and singing along with the guitar). Raras’ friend Fitria laughs, maintaining that “*wah seru abis tuh! Kalau ngumpul sama teman-teman biasanya lupa waktu, puasa sehari singkat*” (totally far out cool! When I’m together with my friends I forget the time, so the fast is shorter). She says “*suka mendengarkan musik rock sambil nunggu beduk*” (I like to listen to rock music while waiting for the drumbeat that signals the end of fasting).

Two girls –Adin and Hesti– are at another table. Adin attends Al-Islam secondary school. She states: “*kumpul bareng teman-teman ke tempat-tempat seperti mall sambil menunggu berbuka bersama mempunyai kenikmatan tersendiri. Selain itu juga memupuk rasa kekompakan dan kebersamaan*” (going about with my friends to places like the mall while waiting to break the fast is really enjoyable in itself. It also enriches feelings of togetherness and unity between us). Hesti is from Karang Anyar. She is actually the aunt of Adin (a great joke). She says that, in the outer suburb of Karang Anyar, “*suka jalan-jalan sambil nongkrong di taman bersama teman-teman sambil menunggu berbuka*” (I love hanging out with my friends in the park while waiting to break the fast) because “*mempunyai makna tersendiri*” (it has a special meaning). Hesti tells me that “*aku biasanya kumpul sama teman-teman di Taman Pancasila, di sana ngobrol sambil menunggu berbuka puasa bareng teman-teman*” (I usually hang out with my friends in Pancasila Park, where we chat while waiting to break our fast together). She adds “*suka menanti buka puasa bersama teman-teman, baginya sangat nikmat karena mereka sebaya*” (like waiting to break the fast with friends, she enjoys it so much because they are of her own age).

### *The mall as a magnet for youth*

Western youth like to spend their time in public/private places such as malls (Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith 1998; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000). The data above suggests that contemporary urban Indonesian youth are no different (Van Leeuwen 2011). Toon (2000: 144) proposes that malls provide lower middle class young people in the West with “a different spatiality more exciting than that offered by the impoverished landscapes of the neighbourhood”. Similarly, spatial components of the mall in Solo are integral to youth socializing. Yet *ngabuburit* is both a sacred and a social practice. The public surveillance function of the mall makes it safe for young people to conduct *ngabuburit* along both religious and social dimensions. The component

of live rock music, albeit religious, makes the experience even more of a youth culture event. Other elements such as female Muslim dress (the headscarf and body covering) constitute piety, while the bright colours and jewelled accessories worn by the same girls express youth fashion. Finally, the major enactment of youth culture in the data above is peer social interaction. This provides the young people with psychological reassurance and stability, as well as a sense of social identity in the transition to adult citizenship. Strolling and talking with friends are not trivial activities, but integral to youth culture at its most satisfying.

Strolling with friends in the mall is now common practice for contemporary young Indonesians (Pratiwo 2003: 12). For example, there was universal agreement among junior high school pupils surveyed in Jakarta that the shopping mall was their favourite place to *nongkrong* (hang out) or *berkumpul* (gather). The three top identified mall activities were: talking, eating, and hanging out (Atmodiwirjo 2008: 343). Atmodiwirjo concludes that Indonesian “adolescents’ needs revolve around settings of social interaction. They need to interact with the same-sex peers and opposite-sex” (2008: 344). In research on mall culture in Jakarta, Ansori (2009) maintains that young people visit the mall to *mejeng*;

*Mejeng* refers to behaviours that purposely display a certain level of consumption, such as wearing the most up to-date fashion trend and meeting with other people of the same class in public spaces. In the mall, they hang around different areas and go from one place to another. They do not really need to buy something because that is not their main purpose (Ansori 2009: 93).

Conducting *ngabuburit* in the mall with friends who share the same sense of religious regulation, produces a satisfying sense of solidarity and moral legitimacy for young people in Solo. The public/private commercial space of the mall, the masses of young people, the rock band, and the orthopraxy of Islam are not contradictory elements (Kroegeer 2003), but complementary components.

### *Tp-tp*

*Tp-tp* is an abbreviation of *tebar pesona-tebar pesona*. It was a phrase commonly heard in Solo in 2007. The meaning could be direct flirting or attracting someone in a more indirect way, such as avoiding eye contact as you walked past while making sure someone noticed you. The latter version of *tp-tp* could be commonly observed at Solo Grand Mall when young people were strolling about and seemed to be a key component of mall youth culture. To gain a sense of what young people actually did in terms of social practice, observational data is offered below.

A group of five girls aged about 16, three wearing the headscarf, two bareheaded, pass a group of six slightly older senior high school boys examining a range of computers displayed on the ground floor. The girls obviously know who the boys



are because they start laughing and talking more loudly as they move slowly past to take the escalator. The boys pretend to ignore them. The girls stop on the floor above, crowding around a kiosk selling handbags which offers a view of the ground floor. After about five minutes, the group of well-groomed boys, wearing t-shirts, runners, and low-slung jeans, takes the escalator. As soon as they move, the girls move too, taking the next two escalators up to a shop which sells jewellery and knick-knacks. Four of the girls examine the necklaces and bracelets on display while the fifth girl is busy sending text messages, some of which she shows to her friends. After circulating around once or twice on the floors below, the group of boys ascends to the same floor. Two of them are texting as they ride the escalator. They walk slowly past the girls, who are still in the jewellery shop, and go into a trendy young men's clothing shop – a *distro* Ita – on the other side of the mezzanine. Text messages are still being sent.

After about ten minutes, the boys take the escalator up to the next floor. They wander slowly through the games arcade. The girls, in high spirits now, leave the jewellery shop and take the escalator up to the same floor, where they inspect plush children's toys in a stall opposite the entrance to the games arcade. Two of the boys then play a game not far from the entrance where they compete in shooting at targets, noisily cheered on by their friends, and singing along with the *nasyid* song *Allah Maha Besar* being belted out by the live band downstairs. The girls more or less drop the pretence of looking at fluffy animals to observe the target-shooting game from a distance. As it comes to a close, one girl looks at her watch and shepherds her friends over to a table in the food court. They sit down and all begin to text or play with their mobile phones, continuing to chat. Some 10 or 15 minutes later, the boys saunter over and occupy a table not far away. By this time it is only a few minutes to the end of the daily fast. All the tables outside the food outlets on the top floor of the mall are fully occupied by young people. The level of chatter and laughter gets louder and louder until the live music ends suddenly and a sonorous amplified drumbeat comes to end the fast.

The girls break their fast with bottles of iced tea, while the boys drink Coca-Cola. The live band has started playing popular rock favourites. As soon as they have all eaten, some of the boys start to call out to the girls, who seem to ignore them while texting furiously. The boys, like the girls, are showing text messages to each other and laughing. This kind of interaction, the boys paying attention to the girls who pretend to ignore them, goes on for about 30 minutes more, then the same girl who had led the way to the table gathers her friends and proceeds downstairs. All five girls are picked up outside the mall in a van, probably driven by a family member. The boys walk around for perhaps 15 minutes more, then take the exit themselves, driving off in twos on motorbikes.

## DISCUSSION

There are a number of points to note. First, there is no doubt that the live band was a significant attraction for young people, providing a deep sense of bonding as an appreciative audience with the same tastes. Second, the extent of mobile phone texting in the observed mall interaction was intense, enhancing and supplementing what was going on in the physical space, similar to that observed in the internet café. Third, observed reactions indicate that at least

some, if not the majority, of text messages were exchanged flirtatiously. So *tp-tp* is produced within the mall not only by the intentions of the young men and women, but through technology and the multi-level spatial configuration of the mall itself. The quasi-religious practice of *ngabuburit* is a further element that conveys a form of moral legitimacy in *tp-tp* by pointing back towards the traditional past in Central Java and outwards in the interpretive direction of regional Muslim orthopraxy. In short, while the young people were maintaining propriety by staying in separate single-sex groups, in the virtual dimension of technological communication they were engaging in *tp-tp*: mild flirting.

So what does this example have to tell us about Indonesian youth culture? The youth cultural practices of young Solonese waiting out the daily Ramadan fast with friends in the mall encodes a contemporary discourse of religious orthopraxy that is both local and global at the same time. The mediated subjectivity they demonstrate and share in the mall during the holy month is constituted within a moral discourse of piety, but at the same time expresses an equally legitimate and modern “material culture of success” (Rowlands 1994). To socialize in the mall is to produce the moral legitimacy (Liechty 2003) of being middle class, implicitly “modern, honourable, and decent” (Ansori 2009: 92). In this situated youth culture practice, the space of the shopping mall, the discursive orthopraxy of Islam, and the time of day are bound together in the constitution of a youthful subjectivity both modern and pious at the same time. In short, these young people achieve public propriety within the new conservative political discourses of Indonesia in a carefully negotiated time/space order of fun and leisure.

## CONCLUSION

In this article on Indonesian youth culture, we have presented some ethnographic material on youth culture by looking at young Muslim Indonesians of both sexes socializing in an internet café and a mall in Solo, Central Java. These two distinctive spaces represent territory within which Indonesian youth culture is commonly enacted. The young people organise space, time, and technology within the strong discourse of moral propriety and gender separation advised by contemporary Islam. We argue that they achieve this balance through reflexivity; constantly evaluating and adjusting their behaviour within the presumption of surveillance. Young women in particular conduct themselves so as to maintain moral legitimacy, yet they manage to have a lot of fun at the same time. Much of the low level flirting (*tp-tp*) appears to remain at the level of *cinta monyet* (puppy love) – minor short-term infatuations and crushes that might never even reach the stage of face-to-face conversation. Perhaps more important is the intensity of social bonding with same-sex age peers that provides security and reassurance for both sexes.

Our analysis here challenges any reductive view of youth culture as either virtuous or *nakal* (naughty). Youth culture is not comprised merely of good or bad

intentions, ideas and social practices on the part of young people, but requires a balance or amalgamation of all these elements. It is also vitally important to understand how the material aspects of modern urban living – computers, mobile phones, urban architecture, public/private commercial spaces – produce the territory within which contemporary Indonesian youth culture is generated and enacted.

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